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ABSTRACT

Many liberal arts colleges have moved away from the central aim of liberal arts learning--person formation for a qualitatively rich life--while still maintaining the liberal arts title. Of America's 3,400 colleges and universities, there are only 212 (6%) genuine liberal arts colleges today who do not award over 60% of their total number of annual degrees in professional fields. The vast majority of these are affiliated with a Christian church denomination or adhere to a Christian creedal stance. The art of rhetoric should be considered to articulate what liberal learning is and why it is important to educators and students. What is needed is not only a bold rhetoric, but a prophetic rhetoric which links the liberal arts message with the transcendent beliefs and values of the Bible. For a teacher at a Christian liberal arts college to possess a prophetic rhetoric, that teacher must assume, to some degree, the role of a prophet. Prophetic rhetoric challenges students toward deeper and stronger convictions about what they believe, why they learn, and how they relate to others. The rhetoric of consumerism vies for control, but is exposed and opposed by the prophetic rhetoric as it relates to the aims of education. Christian rhetoric should challenge students and instructors to consider again the reasons why they study and teach at religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges. ("A Rhetoric of Christian Liberal Arts" is attached; contains 9 references.) (CR)

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Reviving the Rhetoric of the Christian Liberal Arts

by Jeffry Davis
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The fact that higher education in America at the end of the twentieth century has moved away from the central aim of liberal arts learning--***person formation for a qualitatively rich life***--is no revelation. What is shocking news is that many "liberal arts" colleges have moved away from this liberal arts mission while still maintaining the liberal arts title, thus adulterating the "liberal arts" name. Accordingly, the faculty and administrators at bona fide liberal arts colleges face a rhetorical crisis: articulating a liberal arts vision of learning in fresh, compelling language to students and each other.

In an article entitled "Are We Losing Our Liberal Arts Colleges," David W. Breneman presents what he describes as a "startling discovery": "The liberal arts college as we know it is disappearing from the landscape, and another type of institution--the professional college--is taking its place . . . I believe that most educators are not aware of this 'sea change,' nor have we begun to debate its significance" (17). In his book Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered?, Breneman challenges the Carnegie Foundation's classification of institutions of higher education, which identifies 540 private liberal arts colleges in the United States. Breneman's conclusion is that there are only 212 genuine liberal arts colleges today. Assessing each college from the Carnegie Foundation's list according to a specific statistical criterion, Breneman argues that the true liberal arts college is one that does not award over sixty percent of its total number of annual degrees in professional fields (professional fields such as business, engineering, education, nursing, computer science, and agriculture). To put it more strikingly, if a college grants only forty percent of its degrees to liberal arts majors each year, Breneman allows it to maintain its "liberal arts" title. This means that of the approximately 3,400 colleges and universities in this country, just over six percent are genuine liberal arts colleges. The schools excluded from the Carnegie Foundation's list were at one time liberal arts colleges. But, as Breneman notes, "Many of these colleges shifted curricular focus during the 1970's and 1980's to meet student demands and to maintain enrollments, with the changes occurring quietly and largely unnoticed,

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campus by campus . . . yet, in a meaningful sense, the country has still lost several hundred liberal arts colleges" (Liberal 2).

Of those liberal arts colleges that remain on Breneman's list, it is significant to note that the vast majority either are affiliated with a Christian church denomination or adhere to a Christian creedal stance. One of those schools, Wheaton College (Wheaton, IL), where I teach, is presently engaged in an ongoing discussion about how to hold fast to a liberal arts vision of learning into the new millennium. If Breneman is correct about the gradual loss of liberal arts colleges to date, and I think he is, then what can those colleges with Christian roots do to stave off further attrition and strengthen their educational mission? The answer, in part, depends upon the teachers at those colleges. In "Liberal Education and the Christian Intellectual Tradition," Willis Glover clarifies the problem that educators at liberal arts colleges face:

> Many highly intelligent and well-educated people in this country are deeply committed to what they call *liberal education*. Yet there is little understanding of what the term *liberal education* means, and there has been so little effort to define just what kind of education it is that is still deemed appropriate for those entering the learned professions. If the values of liberal education are lost to this culture, it will not be from lack of money or from competition with other programs of study but because its proponents and practitioners have done such a poor job of understanding and explaining what it is. Even professors who are themselves committed to the liberal arts and sciences are for the most part content to describe liberal education in unexamined clichés. (9)

Glover places a large part of the blame for the loss of the liberal arts vision of learning in this country squarely upon the backs of the very purveyors of the liberal arts *weltanschaung*. For it is not enough to tell our students that a liberal arts education will make them "well-rounded individuals," or that a course of study at a liberal arts college provides them with "a timeless and traditional approach to the study of the classics." Clichéd language represents clichéd thinking. It lacks persuasive force, leaving students unmoved.

We would do well to go back to the core of the *artes liberales* curriculum--the trivium--and consider anew the importance of the art of rhetoric as we articulate what liberal learning is, why it is important to us, and why it should be important to our students. What is needed is not just a bold rhetoric, but a prophetic rhetoric, one that links the liberal arts message with the transcendent beliefs and values of the Bible, one that challenges the American society's dominant and oppressive notion of what higher education is all about, one that calls students to a higher purpose for learning and living.

Before examining a prophetic rhetoric for the Christian liberal arts, it makes sense first to understand what a prophet is, and what kind of work a prophet does. The acclaimed Hebrew scholar Abraham J. Heschel offers us some insights here in his work The Prophets:

> The prophet is a person, not a microphone. He is endowed with a mission, with the power of a word not his own that accounts for his greatness--but also with temperament, concern, character, and individuality. As there was no resisting the impact of divine inspiration, so at times there was no resisting the vortex of his own temperament. The word of God reverberated in the voice of man. The prophet's task is to convey a divine view, yet as a person he is a point of view. He speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from the perspective of his own situation. (x)

The prophet, then, in one sense an ordinary human being, possesses an extraordinary vision of life that comes from his relationship to God. And as he relates to other human beings, he conveys his vision with carefully chosen words, transcendent words that have the power to transform. As Heschel explains, "In speaking, the prophet reveals God. This is the marvel of a prophet's work: in his words, *the invisible God becomes audible*. He does not prove or argue. The thought he has to convey is more than language can contain. Divine power bursts in the words. The authority of the prophet is in the Presence his words reveal" (22).

For a teacher at a Christian liberal arts college to possess a prophetic rhetoric, she must assume, to some degree, the role of a prophet. By this I do not mean that she must foretell future events, although she should certainly keep her students mindful of the possible demise of the liberal arts college. The role of the prophet is to beckon those who call themselves "believers" back to the truth affirmed by their tradition. She must acknowledge an unseen but real realm beyond sensory experience from which visions and words come, a realm presented to her through the stories, prophecies, poems, histories, gospels, and letters of the Bible. From the Bible words of faith are received, reconstituted, and then forcefully conveyed to those in her own religious learning community. Prophetic rhetoric calls those associated with a Christian religious tradition from unconscious living to conscious living, from self-reliance to reliance upon God, and from self-indulgence to service. Its goal is revival: to make new that which has become old and to make fresh that which has become stale. Prophetic rhetoric challenges students toward deeper and stronger convictions about what they believe, why they learn, and how they relate to others.

The teacher who embodies prophetic rhetoric--for by its very nature prophetic rhetoric comes from the Presence of the living Word within--is confrontational. Those who hear her rhetoric must be challenged with the bad news before the good news can take effect in their hearts and minds. And what is the bad news with which students, colleagues, and administrators must be confronted? Walter Brueggemann, in The Prophetic Imagination, gives us a clear indication:

> The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act. This enculturation is in some way true across the spectrum of church life, both liberal and conservative. It may not be a new situation, but it is one that seems especially urgent and pressing at the present time. That enculturation is true not only of the institution of the church but also of us as persons. Our consciousness has been claimed by false fields of perception and idolatrous systems of language and rhetoric. (11)

The rhetoric of consumerism insidiously vies for control over the thoughts and actions of those in the Christian church and those in institutions for higher learning affiliated with the church. The teacher with a prophetic rhetoric laments the fact that in the United States "everyday life is thoroughly shaped and governed by management and market relationships, [which] tends to transform everything (and everyone) into manageable objects and marketable commodities" (Kenneson 321). The rhetoric of consumerism, channeled through advertising and various paper and electronic media, tempts students at Christian liberal arts colleges to believe that ultimate security in life comes, not from God, but from Mammon, and that ultimate satisfaction comes, not from loving Christ and serving others, but from loving money and serving yourself. Naturally, then, the rhetoric of consumerism leads many students astray, to see themselves primarily as shoppers, and it seduces them into adopting a pragmatic line of educational thinking that can best be summed up in what might be called the student shopper's credo: If I want to have a good life, then I need to go to college in order to get a marketable degree, in order to get a good-paying job, in order to buy a new car and a nice house, in order to settle down with an attractive spouse, in order to raise a happy family and to provide for their daily "needs" (which, of course, are satiated by more consumer goods and services). This way of thinking, as Richard Ohmann has convincingly decried, has co-opted the purpose of higher education in America.

Liberal arts colleges, capitulating to a consumer culture, have become less concerned with person formation, and more concerned with licensure for a mercantile system and way of life. Consequently, statements like the following from David Bouchier, in his essay "American Higher Education Takes Too Long and Fails to Offer Students What They Want," sound appealing to more and more students, even at religious liberal arts colleges like Wheaton:

> Why should college students (who are, remember, adults, not children) be denied the right to choose what they want in education, namely a fast credential leading to a moneymaking career? It seems positively un-American for educators to insist on teaching students what they don't want to know and then

to define them as the problem when they resist. Among the things most students don't want to know are history (the dead past), literature (dull), other languages (too difficult), philosophy (all questions and no answers), and art (incomprehensible and elitist)--in other words, the traditional product line of the liberal arts college. (B2)

A prophetic rhetoric of the Christian liberal arts exposes and opposes the rhetoric of consumerism as it relates to the aims of education. It rejects the vision of being and doing once described by Victor Lebow, which "demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption" (qtd. in Crocker 13). Instead, a prophetic rhetoric of liberal arts appeals to a student's religious imagination, asking her to catch a brighter, bolder vision of learning and living, one that is shaped by the scriptures and worked out in community.

James Berlin explains that "Every rhetoric . . . has at its base a conception of reality, of human nature, and of language. In other terms, it is grounded in a noetic field: a closed system defining what can, and cannot, be known; the nature of the knower; the nature of the relationship between the knower, the known, and the audience, and the nature of language" (2). In the document that follows, I have provided a written expression of my own prophetic rhetoric of Christian liberal arts, representing the noetic field of the faith and learning heritage of my college community. Rather than validating liberal arts learning according to consumerism, my rhetoric clarifies the natural connections between liberal arts learning and evangelical Christian faith. Therefore it represents ***a*** rhetoric of Christian liberal arts, not ***the*** rhetoric of Christian liberal arts. Clearly, there is room for--and as I have demonstrated, an urgent need for--other Christian rhetorics to emerge, propheti cally challenging students and instructors to consider again the ***reasons*** why they study and teach at religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges.

A Rhetoric of Christian Liberal Arts
by Jeffry Davis, Wheaton College

1) As Christians, we believe that God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and therefore His creation is worthy of our curiosity, exploration and understanding; the physical world is imbued with spiritual significance, and is precious to God because He made it.

2) Because God spoke the universe into existence with words, we affirm the importance of words to our Creator and to ourselves. Created in His image, we use words because He used words first. Words are gifts that we should cherish and use well to worship God and to build community.

3) We believe that humans were originally created to commune with their Maker, made in His image, and proclaimed "good" by His words; but with the entrance of sin into the world, humans are now inclined to live their lives separate from God, in various forms of bondage.

4) We believe that the way to become ultimately "liberal" or free is to receive the revelation of God through the Bible, to obey the commandments of Christ, to trust in His physical birth, death, and resurrection, and to live by His regenerating Holy Spirit in the fellowship of His body, the Church.

5) Through the "arts"--the different academic disciplines--we study God and His creation in particular ways, allowing us to see life from various perspectives. This process not only shows us more about God and His world, it also shows us our gifts, our abilities, and our interests.

6) As new creations in Christ, we believe God has *called* us to college study as a means of learning who He made us ***to be***. If we are honest, we must humbly acknowledge that we do not fully know ourselves. Christian liberal arts encourages the discovery of self in light of His redemptive work.

7) As we encounter the various arts, we come to realize which studies we particularly enjoy and value: we discover our passions. Eventually we choose a major that reflects our passions, keeping in mind that God has put pure passions in each of us to be developed and to be used as a means of blessing others.

8) Choosing a major, however, should not be confused with choosing a career. Christian liberal arts education has as its primary aim person formation, not job training; its intent is to offer students ways of experiencing "the abundant life" in terms other than economic.

9) Because the Christian liberal arts vision encourages the pursuit and development of our God-given passions, it requires a deep faith that God will provide for us in the future, regardless of how "impractical" our major, especially when our community of friends and teachers aid us with prayer, discernment and support.

10) As we come to see ourselves, others, the world, and God as He intends (which is a lifelong process), we are better able to follow Christ's great commandment: To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. This is the natural result of Christian liberal arts.

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